"Leave no one behind": Linguistic and digital barriers to the dissemination and implementation of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals.

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Abstract

In September 2015 the United Nations (UN) adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offering an internationally agreed blueprint for economic, environmental and social development. However those most in need and specifically targeted by the SDGs face significant barriers in accessing information and knowledge about the goals and sustainability in a language or medium that can be understood. Drawing on previous research on the UN's language policy and practice (McEntee-Atalianis, 2006, 2015, 2016) and analyses of recent UN reports and resolutions on multilingualism, information policy and practice and the SDGs, this paper examines the current status of multilingualism and information transfer within the Organisation. Significant linguistic and digital barriers are identified. It is argued that the UN must plan in more linguistically plural and inclusive ways by developing a *tri-sectoral communication network strategy* involving civil society, public and private sectors in order to facilitate knowledge transfer and participation, thereby ensuring that 'no one is left behind'.

En septembre 2015 les Nations Unies (ONU) ont adopté 17 objectifs de développement durables pour le développement économique, environnemental et social. Cependant, ceux dont le besoin est le plus grand et qui sont directement visés par le programme font face à des barrières considérables pour avoir accès à l'information et au savoir concernant les objectifs et la durabilité dans un médium et un langage compréhensible. La présente contribution est basée sur de recherches antérieures sur la politique et les pratiques linguistiques de l'ONU (McEntee-Atalianis 2006, 2015, 2016) ainsi que sur des analyses de rapports et de résolutions récentes sur le multilinguisme, la politique d'information et les pratiques pour les objectifs de développement durables. Elle se penche plus spécifiquement sur le statut actuel du multilinguisme et du transfert d'information au sein de l'ONU. Des barrières linguistiques et digitales significatives sont identifiées. Il ressort de l'étude que l'ONU doit développer une stratégie de réseau de communication tri-sectorielle qui est linguistiquement plurielle et

inclusive. En réunissant la société civile, publique et les secteurs privés afin de faciliter la transmission de savoir et la participation, il est possible de s'assurer que nul n'est abandonné.

Key words: Information Technology, Language Policy, Multilingualism, Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations

1 Introduction

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[1] agreed by an inter-governmental Open Working Group in 2014 and adopted by 193 Member States in September 2015 at the UN General Assembly (United Nations, 2015e) builds on and extends the eight Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) set out in the Millenium Declaration in 2000. They serve as an internationally agreed blueprint for development actors pressing for a global agenda with targets for the assessment of their implementation over a period of fifteen years "to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all" (http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/). The new SDGs seek to rectify the weaknesses of the MDGs, in particular their marginal focus on developing countries and difficult-to-reach groups, and a preference for a universal, "one-size-fits-all" approach to achieving sustainability. The new agenda is ambitious in its scope, more than doubling the number of previous goals and incorporating 169 targets. It promotes a rights-based approach to sustainability, emphasising the importance of democratic participation by all in policy making and in the development of democratic societies. An important addition to the catalogue of objectives is a goal on accountable and inclusive institutions (Goal 16); a goal no less applicable to the UN itself, including targets on access to information and participation in decision-making and increasing access to IT (Goals 9 and 17) as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Sustainable Development Goals 9, 16 and 17

Goal 9 **Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation** **9.c** Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020
Goal 16 **Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels** **16.6** Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels

	16.8 Broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance **16.10** Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements
Goal 17	**Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development** **17.6** Enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge sharing on mutually agreed terms, including through improved coordination among existing mechanisms, in particular at the United Nations level, and through a global technology facilitation mechanism **17.8** Fully operationalize the technology bank and science, technology and innovation capacity-building mechanism for least developed countries by 2017 and enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology

In setting out his stall for the new objectives at the 69th Session of the General Assembly in December 2014, Ban Ki-Moon (Secretary-General), asserted that "All voices [had] demanded that *we leave no one behind*, ensuring equality, non-discrimination, equity and inclusion at all levels…" and that in achieving dignity and justice "we must pay special attention to the people, groups and countries most in need, women, youth, minorities, indigenous peoples…[and] persons with disabilities" (United Nations, 2014c, paragraphs 51 and 68). Further, in order to ensure "effective governance of the SDGs" (paragraph 77) long term investment in information and communication technology within and between countries should be achieved, especially for the poor and developing countries, via multi-party partnerships involving a variety of actors. He claimed (paragraph 123) ambitiously and prematurely that the development of "concrete initiatives, including leveraging technology" should be ready at the outset of the SDGs and that he (/the UN) would facilitate cooperation, record technological initiatives, target "fragmentation" within and outside of the Organisation and encourage networks, the sharing of information, technical expertise and knowledge transfer.[2]

However numerous committees, reports and some studies (e.g. McEntee-Atalianis, 2006, 2015, 2016; Tonkin, 1996a, 1996b, 2011) of the UN in recent years have illustrated

that such initiatives are not in place and that delegates and stakeholders experience difficulties in gaining access to information about sustainability in a linguistic form or via a medium that is timely and easily understood. Moreover the issue of 'language' in the goals themselves is conspicuous by its absence (Fettes, 2015). This paper argues that the means of transfer and implementation of the SDGs should be a goal in its own right, and that attention needs to be paid to nurturing global and multi-sectoral partnerships to engender an internationally enabling environment which places language and communication at the centre.

1.1 Aims

In 2013 Suzanne Romaine argued for the centrality of language in the exercise of the MDGs concluding that "language [is] at the very heart of major fault lines in the development process." (p.2).[3] She notes that in many nations ethnic and linguistic minority groups constitute a large proportion of the bottom fifth of the population who fail to profit from "poverty reduction efforts" (p.2). Pressing in particular for changes to language policy and planning in education, she argues that addressing linguistic and socio-cultural obstacles is essential for poverty reduction and sustainable development. "Because there can be no true development without linguistic development (Romaine, 1990), keeping the promise of the MDGs requires reconciling development with linguistic diversity" (p.2).

This paper supports her call to Applied Linguists to engage in work on development and her assertion that "global agendas like the [SDGs]" should be of "critical concern to Applied Linguists." (p.3). However it takes a different approach to the study of linguistic barriers and diversity, focussing on the UN's organisational constraints, i.e. the 'top-down' operational and participatory constraints that the Organisation is experiencing in simply transferring its goals and information on sustainability to diverse multilingual/multicultural

and technologically disparate environments internationally. It aims to demonstrate that language and the medium of information transfer, (i.e. traditional versus digital media), are inextricably linked, acting as inter-related enablers and/or barriers to the dissemination and implementation of the SDGs and the subsequent creation of strong participatory societies and communities. A dominant ideology and situation of efficiency at low cost prevails at the UN leading to restrictions in multilingual provision (see McEntee-Atalianis, 2015, 2016). However if the goals and work of the Organisation are to achieve impact it must actively involve delegates and stakeholders through the languages they speak and via media they can access. Failure to do so will almost certainly lead to policy failure.

The paper analyses the current linguistic and communicative barriers and makes recommendations with respect to how they should be bridged. Drawing on previous ethnographic and desk research within the Organisation (McEntee-Atalianis, 2006, 2015, 2016) in addition to an analysis of recent UN documentation on multilingualism, the SDGs and information policy and practice, focussing particularly on the work of the Department of Public Information (DPI), (including Assembly and Committee reports on Multilingualism, Information, UN media publications and discussions with UN Secretariat personnel and diplomats) it is evident that the Organisation has sought to promote and take advantage of the lower costs and efficiency afforded by reductions in multilingualism and the mainstreaming of digital media with an increasing use of English. Delegates, particularly (although not exclusively) from developing nations, are calling for attention to be paid not just to multilingual provision but to the growing digital divide (the unequal access to digital information and services) between developed and developing nations[4] and the need for the maintenance of traditional media in the dissemination and implementation of its work. It is clear that those most in need and specifically targeted by the SDGs still face significant barriers in accessing information and knowledge on sustainability and contributing to debate.

The consequences of not prioritising language and communication are serious and cannot be divorced from socio-economic or socio-political development.

This paper contends that linguistic and media support for the dissemination, implementation, and monitoring of the SDGs must involve the contributions and expertise of multiple actors within three sectors – public, private and civil society. The UN's responsibility is to develop a uniform coordinated strategy in order to initiate and nurture collaborative linguistic/media ventures that will facilitate the participation of stakeholder communities and societies internationally - especially those acknowledged to have been "left behind" at the end of the MDGs. What is required therefore is the development of a *tri-sectoral communication network strategy* along the lines previously witnessed in other successful UN endeavours.[5]

The paper begins by contextualising the issue of language and communication at the United Nations within the broader sphere of globalisation, in particular noting the challenges faced by any international organisation in achieving equity in participation and inclusion and in engaging civil society and public and private sectors in its mission. This is followed by an analysis of the current practices and problems experienced by the Organisation in enacting its multilingual policy and the potential difficulties experienced by nation states and civic participants in engaging with its work. The analysis will focus on how Organisational solutions to increasing workloads and reduced budgets have led to a reduction in multilingual provision and practice and a tendency towards the hegemonic use of English and the mainstreaming of digital technology. The implications of the latter for work within the Organisation and for civic participation in the SDGs are then discussed and recommendations for a way forward.

1.2 The global public sphere, civil society and the private sector

Political and social theory has suggested that there is an ever-increasing divide between the spaces and places where world issues are raised (e.g. international organisations) and where they are managed (the nation-state and/or at regional or local levels) (Castells, 2008). The present capitalist global system depends on a network of unequal inter-state relationships (Blommaert, 2009, 2010). This has led, some argue, to "political crises" of "efficiency", "equity", "identity" and "legitimacy" (Castells, 2008, p.82) and as discussed below this can be seen, no less sharply, in matters of multilingual provision (see also Gazarian, 1992). At the same time, networked societies and global governance have become a matter not just for the political elite and intergovernmental organisations, who directly influence national policy through their policies and loan conditions - e.g. the International Monetary Fund - or indirectly via information spread, but also for non-State actors (e.g. civil society – NGOs and pressure groups and for-profit private sector - international businesses/corporations) who are positioned to bring about change in State[6] functions through direct and indirect contact with local communities and people. Their work is facilitated by global and local traditional and digital media outlets. The UN and other intergovernmental institutions recognise that they must engage with the general public not just through national representations and the mechanisms and instruments they create, but also through such channels as the media, for "…multi-modal communication space is what constitutes the new global public sphere" (Castells, 2008, p. 90). This global public sphere is acknowledged to favour and extend to some more than others however, with advances in technology widening the knowledge gap between the haves and have nots - the rich and poor, private and public sectors, developed, developing and undeveloped states (Graham, 2011). Research on language policy and the 'digital divide' has revealed a diverse and multifarious picture across and within sub-State, State and super-State ecologies (Blommaert, 1999, 2009).

Changes in global governance, in particular economic and political liberalism and an exponential growth in information technology, have proven challenging for the UN. Times have changed significantly since the inception of the League of Nations and its subsequent evolution into the current UN system and these have impacted both positively and negatively on its work. Operational and participatory difficulties in global governance include policy makers experiencing a lack of knowledge and/or tools to respond to complex and diverse issues in an increasingly technological world, finding themselves excluding, either intentionally or otherwise, key stakeholders from debate. This is recognised as being detrimental to the Organisation because international organisations can no longer exclude the voices of private businesses or civil society for they have "successfully politicised many global issues and have accumulated significant financial, ideological and bargaining resources" (Reinicke et al., 2000, p.3). As acknowledged by Kofi Anan in his address to the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum in 1999, "The United Nations once dealt only with governments. By now we know that peace and prosperity cannot be achieved without partnerships involving governments, international organisations, the business community, and civil society." Moreover it is through these partnerships that this paper contends the UN can help to overcome operational and participatory gaps brought about by linguistic and digital divides. In matters of inter-state governance and in the enactment of public diplomacy, policy decisions affecting the global public must be shared and implemented in local settings by local people and organisations. Engaging local populations is fundamental to long-term sustainability and should motivate policy decisions. Nevertheless, at the UN "formal institutional structures lack the scope, speed, [finances], and informational capacity to keep up with the global agenda" (Reinicke et al., 2000, p.91). Efforts have been made to nurture partnerships, however to date such attempts have been piecemeal and unsystematic.

2 Linguistic and media challenges facing the United Nations in its public information and outreach work

The UN has experienced an increasing work load and decreasing budgets over recent years which have, along with a tolerance for lingua franca usage within its organisation, led to a marked quantifiable reduction in multilingual provision and use (McEntee-Atalianis, 2006, 2008, 2015, 2016; Piron, 1980; Pearl, 1996; Wyzner, 1992) both internally within the functioning of the Organisation and externally in its public information and outreach work. The effects of the economic crisis coupled with increases in departments' mandates have led to decreases in resources and a euphemistic push within the Organisation for "cost-neutrality" and the need to devise "creative solutions" (United Nations, 2015a) to the problem of supporting multilingualism for political and public diplomacy. Stagnant and reduced budgets have led to a culture of parsimony in which English has become dominant over all other official and working languages[7] and digital dissemination of information is seen as cost-effective and efficient (see discussion below where this is contested). Member states have raised concerns (e.g. United Nations, 2014a) about reductions in multilingual provision particularly with respect to its public information and outreach work. It is notable for example that there has been a marked reduction in the multilingual services and products provided by the Department of Public Information[8], with daily news articles only appearing in English and French and a push to mainstream social media. At the same time, the Organisation has sought to develop ad hoc collaborations with civil society to support its multilingual policy, including Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with University departments and work to provide information in local languages in its network of 63 Information Centres as discussed in greater depth below.

In recent years the main focus of the Organisation's public information and outreach work has been on the development of multilingual websites and social media platforms (see

United Nations, 2014a, p.14-16, paragraphs 73-84 and account below), with a key aim (since 2012) to improve the disparity between material in English and the other official languages of the Organisation. The Organisation claims to be making strides in reducing this and reports on cost-neutral initiatives, such as the new agreements with Universities which have allowed "substantial quantities of materials to be translated into Chinese and Spanish" with "similar agreements …being pursued for other languages" (paragraph 75) and live multilingual coverage of the General Assembly. Unlike other departments in the Organisation the DPI's webpages are in strict compliance with the UN's multilingual policy.[9]

The most recent statistics on website traffic reveal an increase in the number of new sessions developed across all languages, however the continued dominance of English is evident, with over half (53%) of users downloading English text; just under a quarter (23%) accessing material in Spanish; only 8% in French; 6% in Chinese and Russian and just 3% in Arabic. The numbers of pages viewed in the official languages reveals an even stronger bias towards English - 60% of all page views. Figures and percentages for all languages are provided in Table 1 and Figure 1 below (United Nations, 2014a, p.16)

Table 1: United Nations website traffic by language, 1 June 2012-27 May 2014

Language	*New sessions (%)*	*No. of sessions*	*No. of users*	*Page views*	*Pages/session*
Arabic	71.60	3 105 278	2 239 516	7 462 640	2.40
Chinese	74.32	6 292 228	4 749 323	14 827 906	2.36
English	60.42	64 480 663	39 580 932	168 910 109	2.62
French	63.75	8 883 091	5 753 325	22 725 693	2.56
Russian	63.78	6 847 620	4 420 912	14 677 811	2.14
Spanish	70.89	25 005 243	17 912 733	52 213 277	2.09
Total		**114 614 123**	**74 656 741**	**280 817 436**	**2.36**

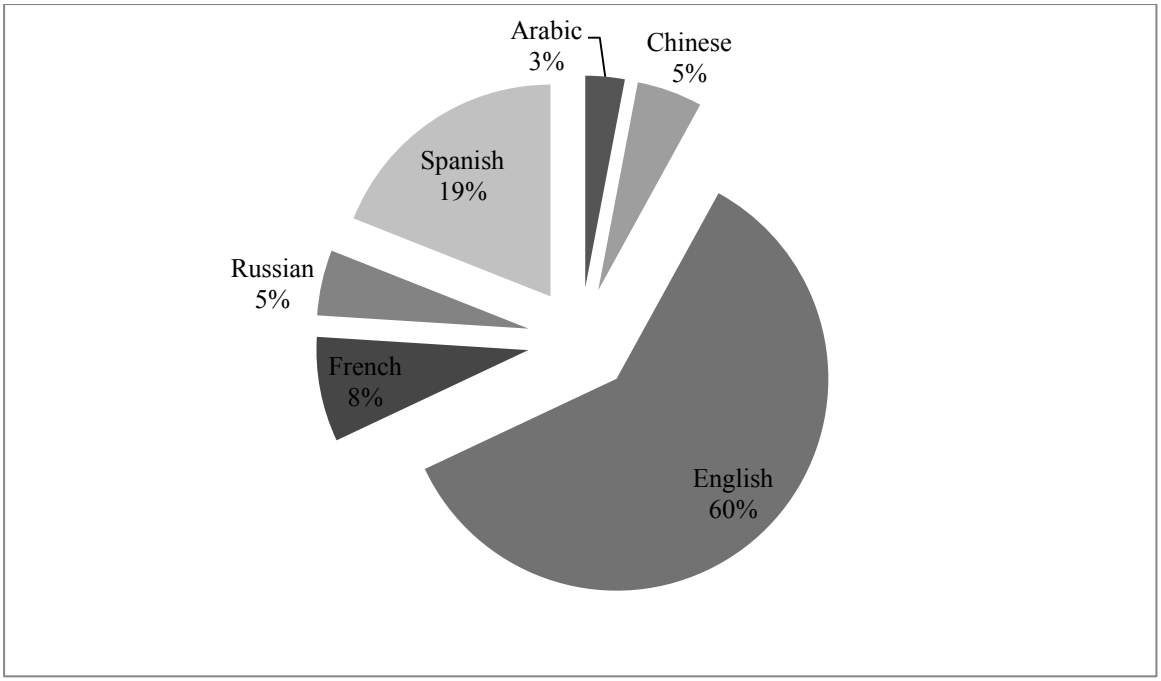

Figure 1 United Nations website views by language, 1 June 2012-27 May 2014

The number of visitors to the UN's website has almost doubled over a four year period; figures for 2010-12 amounting to 154 million page views in comparison with 280 million page views in 2013-14. Viewing figures for materials in English have trebled, with a slightly smaller increase (15 million, in comparison to 11 million) of registered views in Spanish.

A review of UN Secretariat websites reveals that only a third (34%) of sites have been translated into all of the official languages. Of 272 Secretariat websites reviewed 9% (25) provided material in non-official languages. UN Information Centre websites are exempt from providing material in all official languages and some provide material in local languages (accounting for the 9% of non-official material, see further discussion below).[10] Percentage breakdown of website languages reveals a stark picture – English far outstrips all other languages on the Secretariat website with over 90% hosting complete content in English; just over 50% in French and 30% in Spanish and under 30% in Chinese, Russian and Arabic.[11] In February-March 2015 the DPI launched a sustainable development website in all

official languages; the site is designed to be accessible to the general public (United Nations, 2015b, p.16).

Substantial resources have also been devoted to developing social media platforms in all official languages and "several [unspecified] other languages." UN messages are viewed regularly by 9 million people across different platforms (Facebook; Twitter; Vkontakte and the UN Weibo site) with a steady increase registered across all official languages. The DPI also recently rolled out new audio channels in the six official languages and Kiswahili and Portuguese for Android and iOS in addition to two other mobile applications - UN news reader and Calendar of Observances. The latter is also available in Bahasa Indonesia and Kazakh (United Nations, 2015a, p.15, paragraph 65).

Traditional media outlets are given comparatively scant reference in the General Assembly report on Multilingualism reflecting the Organisation's focus on new media (United Nations, 2014a, paragraphs 77 and 80). Nevertheless 100 programmes are available in all of the Organisation's official languages and brief (two-minute) 'UN stories' have been developed in recent years. The news magazine programme '21st Century' has also extended its coverage to French and Chinese, the latter enabled by a partnership with the Chinese Business Network in Shanghai. UN radio and News Centre cover "breaking news, reports and feature stories" (p.15) in all six official languages with some additional programmes produced in Kiswahili, Portuguese[12], Urdu, Hindi and Bangla.

Contact with NGOs by the DPI's Non-Governmental Organisation Resource Centre has increased its linguistic capacity to respond to queries – now extending its capability to

German, Italian, Portuguese and Ukrainian. However applications for association with the UN can only be processed in English, French and Spanish.

The 63 Information Centres (ICs) operating in the regions of Africa; the Arab States; the Americas; Asia and Pacific; and Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States work in total in five out of the six official languages, however most work only in one or two. They produced promotional (print and multi-media) material in 40 languages in 2013 and maintained websites in 30 local languages.[13] Analysis of the websites provided in the local languages (see http://unic.un.org/aroundworld/unics/en/whoWeAre/index.asp for raw data) reveals an uneven picture of provision which somewhat masks a marked disparity in languages available on the internet across the centres, for example UNRIC Brussels (Belgium) supports 13 languages, in contrast to UNIC Acca (Ghana), which only supports English. A notable difference is particularly apparent in the support given to the local languages in the region of Europe and the Commonwealth, in contrast to all other regions. Only two Centres (out of 16) in Africa - a continent with the most diverse linguistic ecology - support a local language - Kiswahili (UNIC Dar es Salaam and UNIC Nairobi); only one additional local language (other than English) i.e. Portuguese, is maintained in the Americas by UNIC Rio de Janeiro; six local languages (Bahasa Indonesia, Bengali/Bangla; Hindi; Japanese; Persian and Urdu) are maintained on a few websites in Asia and Pacific (across 11 ICs); whilst 24 languages appear on websites in Europe and the Commonwealth (14 ICs), where the greatest number of websites and languages are supported by UNRIC Brussels (Belgium) and UNIS Vienna (Austria).

Alongside the use of traditional media (television and radio programmes) concerted efforts have been made within ICs to enhance digital tools including websites, social media platforms and mobile telephones “to reach a wider and younger audience in a timely and

effective manner" (United Nations, 2015a, p.11, paragraph 48).[14] 76% (48/63) of ICs have Facebook accounts and 63% (40/63) host Twitter accounts, less than half of these (17) are in languages other than English however. 29 (46%) are reputed to have YouTube accounts in twelve languages (including English). Information Centres, as other arms of the UN, face resource constraints and have been forced to explore 'cost-neutral' alternatives to providing multilingual information. These have included: the IC in Rio de Janeiro working in collaboration with the UN in Brazil to support the provision of Facebook and Twitter pages in Portuguese; the IC in Islamabad in 2014 signing an MoU with a Pakistani[15] network (PTV World) in order to translate news and campaigns into Urdu and 23 regional languages (United Nations, 2015a, p.11 and 12, paragraph 49 and 52); and ad hoc partnerships with educational institutions and local UN teams or the UN Communications Group. For example, UNRIC in Brussels has partnered with Universities to provide 'virtual interns' (United Nations, 2015c, p. 19, paragraph 95) for the translation of UN documents. In exchange for their work students receive module credits. Moreover UNIC Jakarta engaged 20 interns to translate 1,400 documents in 2013.

41 ICs produce their own newsletters either in print or electronic form informing interested parties about conferences, special and current events. These are produced in 16 local languages. They are also noted to "prepare, reissue and often translate" fact sheets, press releases and other information into 43 local languages (United Nations, 2015a, p.12 paragraph 51).

In disseminating information about sustainable development in particular, it is reported (United Nations, 2015a, p.19 paragraph 94) that the combined translations of some ICs of the Secretary-General's document "A global movement for change" (United Nations, 2012) peaked at 22 languages reaching "64 outlets in 42 countries". The strategic communications service of the DPI has developed a magazine: 'Africa Renewal-Afrique

Renouveau' in order to report on its 'New Partnership for Africa's Development' (United Nations, 2015a) and an accompanying online website in English and French. The syndicated feature service of the magazine meant that articles were republished in Africa and elsewhere, in English and French (632 times in 164 media outlets). However many initiatives have been piecemeal and many stakeholders can still not access vital information on sustainability in a language or via a media that is easily accessible. An independent report by commissioned by UN DESA (2013, p.1) discusses the means of "strengthening public participation…for sustainable development" noting with respect to public engagement "a lack of local language use" (p.15) and the need to reach people in their local languages. This report highlights the patchy nature of multilingual provision and stresses the dominance of English within the work of the UN calling for greater language diversity, noting that many UN documents relating to sustainability remain untranslated into the UN's official languages, "let alone unofficial languages" (p.20) hampering the participation of many. The report calls for funding to be allocated to increase "multilingual capacity" (p.20).

2.1 Critical review

Whilst a shift to digital media has been a policy focus and practical endeavour at the UN, seen as a cost-effective and an efficient means of information transfer, the figures and analysis above, in addition to reports from UN personnel (McEntee-Atalianis, 2015, and conclusions in United Nations, 2014a; 2015a) demonstrate that this is not a panacea. Many representatives attending the Committee on Information in 2015 (United Nations, 2015a) expressed deep concern with the widening gap between developed and developing nations and emphasised that priority must be given to ensuring that information on the post-2015 SD agenda is disseminated in the first instance in all of the UN's six official languages (as stated in United Nations, 2015d, Resolution 69/324) to ensure "accountability, transparency,

ownership and sustainability" and that daily press releases are made in all of the UN's languages and in a traditional format[16] which will enable public and private sectors as well as individuals to engage with the work of the Organisation and express their views and values through "endogenous cultural" (p.13) products. The report "notes with concern" (paragraph 88) that many services provided for outreach and knowledge transfer are not available in the six official languages with English dominating over all others. A minority of nations - the United States of America, Japan and South Africa - whilst agreeing with the sentiment of multilingualism, pushed for 'cost neutrality' noting that an unexpected request by the Organisation for an additional $13.8 million to expand multilingual provision at the 69th Session of the General Assembly (2014) must not be replicated. Delegates unanimously praised the work of the UN Information Centres recognising their function and potential as important sites of information transfer in local languages. Calls were made for capacity building within these sites and the importance of allocating financial resources to support their work.[17] Moreover special attention to the development of communication capabilities and infrastructure in developing nations to eliminate current disparities in information flows was mapped as a priority with co-operation encouraged within and across nations and regions. Overall, the need to engage with "a new world information and communication order, seen as an evolving and continuous process" (p.13) was recognised as fundamental to the successful dissemination and implementation of UN Sustainable Development goals.

The reality is however that in responding to an ever-increasing workload and reduced budgets the actions proposed in the 2015 Resolution on Multilingualism entertain the continuation of linguistic parsimony and the mainstreaming of digital media - a continuation of what some may see as a "digital apartheid" (Graham, 2011). Networked communication technology is inaccessible to many and/or material posted on sites is not in a language or in cyberspaces that are accessible to all (see Graham's 2011 discussion of physical and

'existential' divides) – especially those nations, vulnerable communities and individuals specifically targeted by the SDGs. Where measures have been taken to increase translation into official and local languages using cost-effective and cost-neutral means problems persist. For example, whilst the use of voluntary services such as partnerships with Universities is beneficial, it is neither free nor efficient. Interns' work is comparatively slower than that of professional translators and has to be supervised and checked to ensure it meets the editorial consistency and standards of quality expected by the UN. Moreover many of these agreements have been forged in developed nations. Information and news material in the source language (most notably English) frequently precede those in other languages and not all languages are translated. Russian and Chinese representatives in particular lodged objections to the unfair representation of the official languages on the UN sites noting that only 25% of material is translated into all official languages[18]. Further, a move towards recycling texts previously translated for other purposes has meant a reduction in translation costs, although arguably their reproduction does not fully service the needs of their new context of use nor carry the same pragmatic force.

The DPI's dissemination of the SDGs and information on sustainability is constrained by and rooted in the Organisation's policy and practice. The reality for the DPI (as other departments of the UN) is that mandates have expanded; expectations by delegates and stakeholders have grown, whilst resources have shrunk. This has led to operational and participatory gaps. Staff and member states at the UN find themselves working within an increasingly technologically-oriented organisational culture which favours a minority of the organisational languages and imposes developed-country norms of communication. Some delegates report feeling excluded or disadvantaged receiving information at a slower rate or not in an officially recognised organisational language that they would prefer to work in. Transference of information to the outside world is also limited by these operational

constraints and the work of individual Information Centres relies on ad hoc partnerships with external agencies.

Bridging the digital divide is far from easy and still would not solve the myriad barriers to access to information about the SDGs for key stakeholders. The reality is that the majority (54.6%) of the world's population still remain off-line. The top 20 countries (with the greatest number of users) constitute 73% of total world usage. See Figure 2 below.

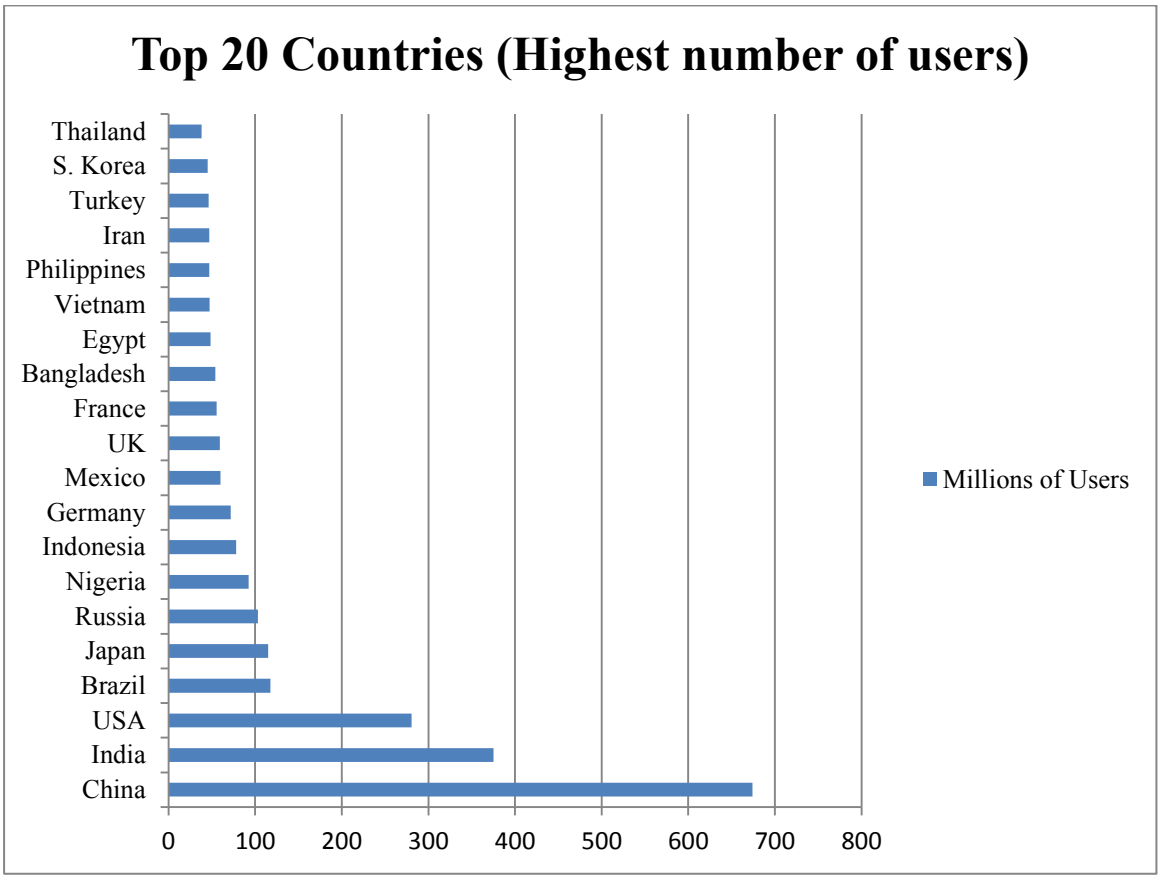

Figure 2: Top 20 Countries with the highest number of users (November 30 2015). Source: www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm

Moreover penetration rates, i.e. percentage of the population with access varies considerably between developed and developing nations/regions (with the exception of the Republic of Korea), as shown in Table 3 and Figure 4 below.

Table 2: Penetration rates per country (www.internetworldststs.com/stats.htm) with UN Economic Categorisation

Number	Country or Region	Penetration (% population)	Economies
1	China	49.5 %	Developing (E Asia)
2	India	30.0 %	Developing (S Asia)
3	USA	87.4 %	Developed
4	Brazil	57.6 %	Developing (S America)
5	Japan	90.6 %	Developed
6	Russia	70.5 %	Economy in transition
7	Nigeria	51.1 %	Developing (W Africa)
8	Indonesia	30.5 %	Developing (E Asia)
9	Germany	88.4 %	Developed
10	Mexico	49.3 %	Developing (Central America)
11	United Kingdom	91.6 %	Developed
12	France	83.8 %	Developed
13	Bangladesh	31.9 %	Developing (S Asia)
14	Egypt	54.6 %	Developing (N Africa)
15	Vietnam	50.1 %	Developing (E Asia)
16	Philippines	43.0 %	Developing (E Asia)
17	Iran	57.2 %	Developing (S Asia)
18	Turkey	59.6 %	Developing (W Asia)
19	Korea	92.3 %	Developing (E Asia)
20	Thailand	55.9 %	Developing (E Asia)
	Top 20 countries	49.9%	
	Rest of the world	38.9%	
	Total World Users	46.4%	

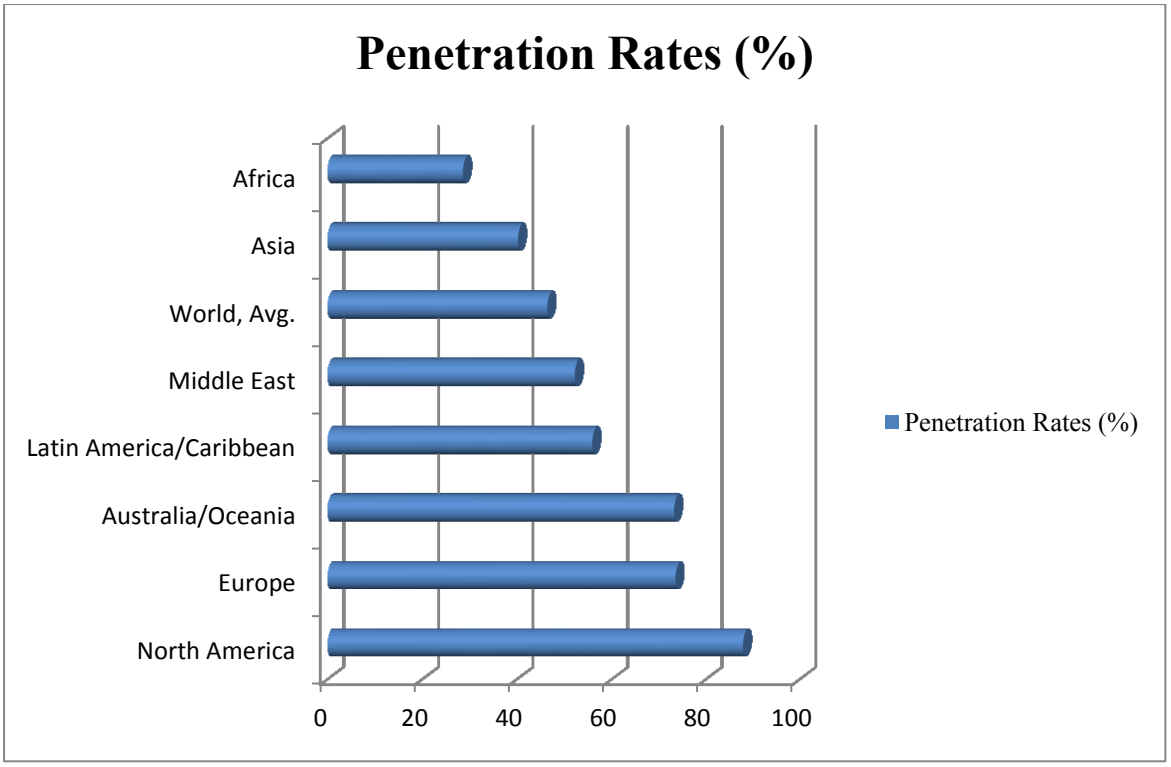

Figure 3: Penetration rates (%) by geographic region (November 30, 2015)
Source: Internet World Stats – www.internetworldststs.com/stats.htm

A growing linguistic divide exists - English remains dominant as the content language on the Internet[19] far outstripping the presence of other languages internationally.

Table 3: Percentage of websites using content languages[20] (W3Techs.com, http://w3techs.com/technologies/overview/content_language/all downloaded 8 April 2016)

	Language	**%**		**Language**	**%**		**Language**	**%**
1	English	53.6	14	Arabic	0.8	27	Bulgarian	0.2
2	Russian	6.4	15	Czech	0.8	28	Hebrew	0.2
3	German	5.6	16	Vietnamese	0.6	29	Norwegian	0.1
4	Japanese	5.1	17	Korean	0.6	30	Lithuanian	0.1
5	Spanish	4.9	18	Indonesian	0.5	31	Croatian	0.1
6	French	4.1	19	Swedish	0.5	32	Ukrainian	0.1

7	Portuguese	2.5	20	Greek	0.5	33	Serbian	0.1
8	Italian	2.1	21	Romanian	0.4	34	Norwegian Bokmål	0.1
9	Chinese	1.9	22	Hungarian	0.4	35	Catalan, Valencian	0.1
10	Polish	1.9	23	Danish	0.3	36	Slovenian	0.1
11	Turkish	1.8	24	Thai	0.3	37	Latvian	0.1
12	Dutch, Flemish	1.4	25	Slovak	0.3	38	Estonian	0.1
13	Persian	1.2	26	Finnish	0.2			

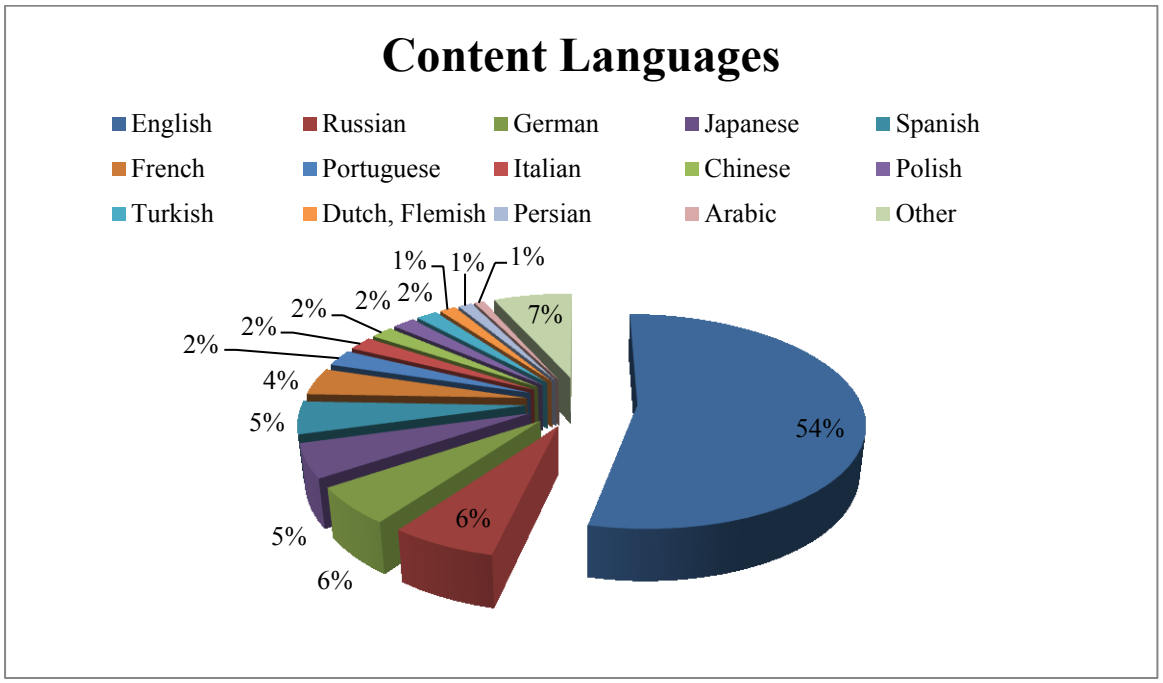

Figure 4: Percentage of content languages on the Internet

The dominance of English is also evident in social media and the products emerging from the UN.[21]

Many languages use a non-Latin script; many others use an elaborated version of the Latin alphabet which is not catered for in current technology. For the Internet to function globally it must be able to accommodate multilingual scripts and alphabets. Nations most in

need, in particularly those recognised as most 'vulnerable' in the 'Report of the Open Working Group on the General Assembly on the SDGs Agenda' (United Nations, 2014b, Items 14, 19 (a) and 118) notably: African states; least developed countries; small island States, developing land-locked states, Middle-income countries and countries in conflict often have the most diverse multilingual populations to address and service. At national levels they experience problems of infrastructure; finance; technology and capacity-building, not to mention social and political barriers to information transfer such as: educational, ethnic, gender, and socio-economic disparities. Indigenous communities[22], the poor, disabled, and women, (to name but a few), remain excluded. Nations with the highest linguistic diversity are reported to have the highest percentage of children (72% of the world's population) not in education globally (Pinnock, 2009).

Moreover, current statistics on adult and youth literacy reveal that 63% of the illiterate population are women, with some 757 million adults (15 years and above) recorded as illiterate (UNESCO, 2015). Most of these girls (83%) are from Sub-Saharan Africa, East and South Asia, and the Pacific and from minority communities (ethnic, linguistic, religious) (Romaine, 2013, p.7, UNESCO, 2010). Romaine (2013, p.11) asserts that "[n]o country has ever achieved continuous and rapid economic growth without first having at least 40% of adults able to read and write…." (The Basic Education Coalition, 2004, p.2, 7). Where internet facilities are available and accessible to literate girls in telecentres or internet cafes these can be highly masculinised spaces and closed to women.

The possibility of wifi connection is limited to the rich (Graham, 2011). Internet access in many African states is below 5% with electricity functioning intermittently and for a few hours each day. In Ghana, for example, internet access can cost "80-90% of average income" (Schuppan, 2009, p.122). In rural Africa approximately 70% of the population speak a tribal language and English is mainly inaccessible. Approximately 90% of Africans find

their official language inaccessible (Mackey, 1989 in Romaine, 2013) and only 5% of African languages are supported in higher education (Ouane and Glanz, 2010 in Romaine, 2013, p.10). Romaine (2013, p.7) notes that "a third (30.5%, N =2,110) of the world's languages and a third of the world's poor" live in Africa with greatest poverty and under-development existing in the linguistically diverse countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Africa continues to struggle with development experiencing difficulties in accessing information and knowledge and subsequently contributing to knowledge creation and development. Without the ability to engage in discussions about development in their local languages key stakeholders will remain isolated from the global development agenda. This situation applies as much to nations in Africa as minority communities in comparatively wealthy nations.

Due to these linguistic and technological barriers, failure in policy transfer[23] will arise and will emerge from different sources beginning top-down from the UN itself, as national representatives/key stakeholders have insufficient information about the SDGs and sustainability to impart to their governments and people. There may even be incomplete transfer of information and knowledge; and/or inappropriate transfer of policy or programmes. Information and the way in which it is communicated play a vital role in popularising the SDGs and in nurturing ownership amongst Governments and stakeholders.

So how might the UN attempt to remedy the situation?

3 A *tri-sectoral communication network strategy* for information transfer

This paper contends that policies and practices must be directed towards ensuring greater linguistic and technological equity and inclusion first at the organisational level (including key departments, agencies, programmes and funds) in order for member states to be able to debate and take action, and then at regional, national and local levels to facilitate universal access to information about sustainability.[24] The mainstreaming of digital media is not a

panacea and the realities of the 'digital divide' must be one of the main policy issues addressed by the UN, with priority given to ensuring that the dissemination of information about the SDGs and sustainability is not only digitally transferred but is also conveyed using traditional media (radio, television, newspapers, printed documents) in local languages. Given the UN's capacity constraints this work will demand systematic and reliable network building and multi-sector collaboration between civil society (e.g. NGOs), the public sector (states and international/national organisations) and the 'for-profit' private sector. Such "tri-sectoral" (Reinicke et al., 2000, p.28) networks will bring local partners and the general public into the global debate.

There is always a danger in networked collaboration that responsibility becomes diffuse but this paper argues that it is the role of the UN to develop and operate these networks. The UN's role would be to facilitate the identification of key actors and organisations that can provide linguistic and technological support at global, regional and local levels; support the development and maintenance of these networks; and contribute to and monitor their effective operation. As in any of the UN's projects, networks have been acknowledged as "not just a policy choice but an operational imperative if it is to meet its goals effectively and efficiently" and will ensure the inclusion of "the disempowered and marginalised constituencies" (Reinicke et al., 2000, p.92) such as indigenous communities, women, the poor. Moreover networks may be initiated and managed bottom-up facilitating the adaption of global policies to local situations.

Recommendations for changes in the UN language policy and practice have already been discussed (McEntee-Atalianis, 2015, 2016) however in its outreach work, in conveying the goals for sustainable development and in ensuring their successful implementation, the UN needs to develop an effective system-wide communication and information strategy and programme[25] based on a networked framework as proposed. A typical network would include

voluntary contributions from interest groups and civil society/NGOs[26] (nationally and transnationally); financial and technical support from local and/or global businesses and corporations in targeted settings; and co-ordination and legislation arising from states and the UN. Consideration needs to be given to the:

i) reception of the *goals* - whether or not these will be voluntarily taken up or involve coercion;

ii) *agents/institutions/organisations* necessary for information transfer at global, regional and local levels (e.g. UN personnel; elected officials; bureaucrats; civil servants; NGOs; communication and technology businesses and transnational corporations; consultants; language specialists – including interpreters and translators);

iii) *management of the path* of transfer and *sectors/communities* involved - from UN to State/Governments to local authorities/contexts/communities, including a consideration of the linguistic and technological needs at each level;

iv) *investments/resource requirements* in infrastructure and capacity building for information and communication transfer, including funding (public/private donors), staffing, training and equipment (financial and otherwise, e.g. material, personnel);

v) *type* of transfer and *sharing* of resources nationally/regionally/globally - linguistic and media (traditional/Internet) – whether innovating new materials and media or using those produced elsewhere, in national, regional or global contexts;

vi) *barriers* which may impede multilingual transfer of information i.e. structural and otherwise - political/institutional/socio-economic/cultural/technological/linguistic/attitudinal etc.;

vii) *targets* - minimum and maximum targets, nuanced for different contexts. Common but differentiated responsibilities[27] should be determined including consideration of speed of progress and stages of delivery.

viii) *review* of progress at local, regional and global levels. At local level involving: Government representatives; officials; civil society; business; language specialists etc. At regional level countries can share experiences and address common issues/problems. At global level political fora on SDGs will monitor progress, identify difficulties, recommend and support action.

Examples of successful ad hoc public-private collaborations are already available, particularly in the work carried out by some Information Centres (as discussed above) which have experienced decreasing or stagnant budgets and have drawn on the expertise and assistance of multiple agencies within and outside of the UN to produce materials, traditional media products and Internet resources. Some, as noted above, have formed partnerships with broadcasting stations. To date there is insufficient data about such partnerships and the impact on their potential audiences however.[28] Other successful partnerships in enacting sustainability have been reported in Reinicke et al. (2000) and by the UN itself.[29]

4 Conclusion

Access to knowledge is one of the UN's indices for human development, but to achieve development and to find long-term sustainable solutions to global challenges a collective effort must be made. These efforts must prioritise the development of networks of support involving multiple partners across various ecologies, prioritising the involvement of local stakeholder communities in their languages in order to ensure take-up and support of policy goals. Knowledge cannot be transferred without access to media and sources of information that can be easily understood. Inequity in information transfer will only lead to persistent problems in attempting to tackle global issues of poverty, hunger, gender equality and literacy.

This paper argues that current information and language policy and practice at the UN is too constrained to support the effective transfer of the SDGs and information on sustainability to diverse multilingual and technologically supported settings. The solution is not simply economic but also social, cultural and political. There are many reasons for lack of access to information at the organisational level and even more complicated reasons within the field, as noted above (e.g. age, gender, social status differences within national and local settings, political barriers). The UN has for reasons of economics and efficiency prioritised digital work streams and the use of lingua franca which have impacted negatively on information transfer. These have engendered practices which exclude and/or discriminate against those whose preference is for a language other than English and who do not have easy access to digital media. Under such circumstances national representatives and stakeholders find themselves without the information and knowledge to engage and respond to issues initiated at the inter-state level.

The Report of the Open Working Group of the General Assembly on the SDGs (United Nations, 2014b) called aspirationally for the Organisation to "strive to increase access to information and communication technology…to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020" and by 2030 "people everywhere [should] have the information and awareness of sustainable development' ensuring 'public access to information" (paragraphs 12.8 and 16.10). Attempting to bridge 'the digital divide' within and outside the Organisation must not, as argued above, be seen as a panacea; information technology cannot combat structural and social pressures of discrimination and inequality. Attention to traditional modes of information transfer must also be considered in order to reach the widest possible audience. Nuanced plans and networks are needed to meet the needs of diverse contexts. It is incontestable that information societies can address global problems more easily however the efforts needed to reach 'people everywhere' will demand

more than the provisions and plans currently in place. It needs co-ordinated and strategic support from a multitude of agents, communities and organisations. Bringing these together in networks of super-state, state and sub-state partnerships to facilitate access to multilingual information and to enable engagement in debate and problem-solving for the successful transference and implementation of the SDGs should be prioritised as a goal in itself. Without it sustainability cannot take root.

Endnotes

[1] See https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300 for a list of all goals and targets.
[2] United Nations (2014b) Report of the Open Working Group of the General Assembly on the SDGs claimed that it was a goal to '[s]ignificantly increase access to information and communication technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020 (paragraph 9c).
[3] Also see Phillipson's (1996) earlier account of the role of language in the UN's development agenda.
[4] It must be noted that the 'digital divide' does not correlate neatly with the division between the local v global or developed v developing countries nor a North/South divide. Reinicke et al. (2000, p. 88) assert that many living in industrialised nations still have limited if any access to the internet, whilst Governments and NGOs in developing nations do. On balance the global South is less able to access information technology however.
[5] E.g. The "Roll Back Malaria" campaign (see Reinicke et al., 2000).
[6] Blommaert (2009, p.240) suggests that the term 'state' now extends to sub-state actors/institutions (e.g. unions, civil society groups, regional/local governments); the nation-state and super-state institutions e.g. the EU or UN.
[7] The UN supports six official languages – Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish and a varied number of working languages across its Headquarters and agencies and ecologies therein. See McEntee-Atalianis (2015) for details.
[8] The Department of Public Information (DPI) is the conduit for the dissemination of information about the UN to global audiences. It consists of three main divisions: Strategic Communications (key responsibilities include the development and implementation of strategies for communicating UN information and managing Information Centres); News and Media (news services - print, radio, television and internet) and Outreach and Knowledge Division (conveys information and encourages exchange of ideas and knowledge in support of the UN agenda).
[9] See United Nations 2015d.
[10] Details on the website and working languages for each of the Information Centres can be found at: http://unic.un.org/aroundworld/unics/en/whoWeAre/index.asp
[11] The UN intranet for delegates in New York only maintains pages in English and French.
[12] The Portuguese Unit created over 20 new partnership agreements to broadcast programmes in 2014, the Kiswahili Unit established six new partnerships (United Nations, 2015b, p.3, paragraph 11, 18).
[13] These included: Armenian, Bahasa Indonesia, Bangla; Belarusian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, Georgian, German, Greek, Hindi, Hungarian, Icelandic, Italian, Japanese, Kazakh, Kiswahili, Malagasy, Norwegian, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Slovak, Slovene, Swedish, Turkish, Ukrainian, Urdu and Uzbek. Materials ranged from brochures to video and audio press kits.
[14] Examples of ad hoc campaigns are listed however an exhaustive listing is not provided.
[15] A research study undertaken by the UN Pakistan "Communication Group" determined that 61% of Pakistanis had no opinion about the UN. This prompted the development of the 'One UN Programme' to engage multiple sectors and agents e.g. media; government institutions (federal and provincial); civil society; the general public and donors.

[16] In contrast to the limited availability of e-resources 75% of households are reported to have radios (UNESCO, 2014). Arguably the use of traditional media should be prioritised in the Department's planning.
[17] Some report a decline in materials available in the official (let alone local) languages, e.g. Belarus report a decline in Russian material, only receiving information in English which they claim to be 'of no use'. Moreover the budget has remained at the same level as 1995.
[18] It is interesting to note that the Division of Sustainable Development (Department of Economic and Social Affairs) conducted on-line consultations in English, Spanish and Chinese (only) to support the preparation of the Global Sustainability Report.
[19] Although see Danet and Herring (2007) for examples of other languages (even code-switching) on the Internet.
[20] These content languages appear less than 0.1% on websites: Hindi; Azerbaijani; Malay; Bosnian; Bengali; Icelandic; Macedonian; Albanian; Georgian; Mongolian; Galician; Armenian; Northern Sami; Basque; Tamil; Urdu; Kazakh; Norwegian Nynorsk; Afrikaans; Kanuri; Sinhala, Sinhalese; Uzbek; Belarusian; Breton; Burmese; Filipino, Pilipino; Marathi; Abkhazian; Khmer, Cambodian; Swahili; Telugu; Malayalam; Kurdish (W3Techs.com, downloaded 8 April 2016). Note a website may use more than one content language.
[21] A fact acknowledged by UNESCO (2014). Non-native English language users represent the majority of internet users (Shea et al., 2007). Graham (2011, p.221-222) argues "English is a dominant language on the Internet (Flammia and Saunders, 2007) and despite recent developments in machine translation, those not fluent in English are likely to face significant barriers to both non-proximate communication and organising online content into meaning. The contexts and positionalities of information sources and those accessing virtual information also strongly influence how information can be retrieved and used."
[22] Indigenous populations constitute around 15% of the world's poorest peoples and speak 60% of the world's languages (Nettle and Romaine, 2000, p.ix).
[23] See Dolowitz and Marsh's (2000) discussion of factors leading to failure in policy transfer.
[24] UNESCO already recognises that developments in information and communication technology are imperative for economic and social development. They are understood as fundamental to the eradication of poverty in developing countries. There are however major disparities between and within developed and developing countries.
[25] A distinction is made between policy (meaning a statement of intent and broad plan of action) and programme (meaning the actions necessary in order to effectively implement policy).
[26] The civil society sector is now quite large and has direct access to sources of international funding. Donor organisations (particularly those supporting projects in developing nations) often prefer to provide funds through NGOs/civil society groups rather than Government organisations (Reinicke et al., 2000).
[27] The notion of 'common but differentiated rights' was proposed by the Center for Economic and Social Rights (2015). They argue that some countries, particularly developed countries, bear greater responsibility for sustainable development given the impact they have had on the global environment and their command of superior resources (financial and technological): "These differentiated responsibilities should be reflected and concretely captured when States are crafting targets, commitments and indicators regarding the means of implementation for the post-2015 agendas." (p.1). They assert that their contributions should not only focus on aid but in co-operating in mobilising resources for universal cultural, economic and social rights.
[28] Such information and its "multiplying impact" were recently requested at the 37th session of the Committee on Information (United Nations, 2015a, p.26, paragraphs 62 and 63).
[29] For example, they report on training provided by Deloitte on the UN Compact Global Management which was delivered in five local networks using local languages (see https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnership/?p=1035).

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